

“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants” Gen 17:7

The prophets of Israel were essentially messengers whom God sent to his people to remind them of things about which he had already spoken. He had communicated his “Law” through Moses in the wilderness, and made clear the blessings that would follow obedience and the curses that would follow disobedience. The prophets were sent because the nation had been grossly disobedient and was therefore faced with an outpouring of judgement. God had not only communicated his “Law” through Moses, however, but had much earlier made proclamations which had to do with the destiny of the nation. These proclamations took the form of the covenant promises that God made to the Jewish nation at its very inception with Abraham, and those covenant promises provide the bedrock for all that the prophets had to say about the hope of a restoration of Israel from its scattering and exile. For even in the midst of threatening judgement, God wanted to speak to them of that destiny. To really grasp, therefore, what the prophets were driving at in their restoration prophecies we need to understand those covenant promises. One thing is clear, despite all the warnings they gave to Israel of punishment for their disobedience to the “Law”, the prophets did not convey the idea that God intended to abrogate his covenant promises to the nation.

The Jewish Nation’s Foundation Deeds

Those covenant promises were first made in God’s original call to Abraham to leave his own country and step out to a new land. Abraham was told, *“Leave your country ... and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation ... All the peoples of the earth will be blessed by you”* (Gen 12:1-2). Thus the promises were that Abraham was to be the founder of a great nation, that the nation would inhabit a new land and that it would have a destiny of bringing blessing to all peoples on earth. The LORD would be their God. The promises deal with Israel as a nation, with its destiny and with the land that was assigned to it. Those promises are given the status of covenants and they are the foundation deeds of the nation.

They are foundation deeds of magnificent scope and intent, involving not just Israel but the whole world. No other nation has received such extraordinary foundation deeds - deeds conveyed by a God intent on blessing a fallen world.

Promises Constantly Re-affirmed.

This initial declaration of God was by no means the only occasion on which he made these promises. He re-iterated them throughout Abraham’s life. So when Abraham had left his country and first arrived in Canaan, God appeared to him and reaffirmed the promise of the land, *“To your offspring I will give this land”* (Gen 12:7). Sometime later when, due to conflict between their servants, Abraham and Lot parted company, God reaffirmed the promise of a nation and the land, *“Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”* (Gen 13:14-15) Later still, at a point when his faith was particularly tested over having no heir, God said to him, *“Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them. “So shall your offspring be.”* At that same time God once again affirmed the promise of the land: *“I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”* (Gen 15:2-7) . At a further stage still, just prior to the birth of Isaac, when Abram was ninety-nine years old, and the fulfilment of the promise of offspring looked very unlikely God spoke again to Abraham, *“I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”* Abram fell face down, and God said to him, *“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”* (Gen 17:1-8). A final word came after the aborted sacrifice of Isaac: *“I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”* (Gen. 22:16-18)

“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant for generations to come

The promises were also spoken after Abraham’s death, to the other “Patriarchs”. They were confirmed first to Isaac, Abraham’s son: *“The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed”* (Gen 26:2-4) They were next confirmed to his grandson, Jacob in a dream: *“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”* (Gen 28:13)

A Covenant and An Oath

Such a wealth of re-iterated promises makes them unassailable. Two of these occasions, however, powerfully underline the total commitment of God to his promises . The first of these occasions was after the aborted sacrifice of Isaac. Seeing Abraham’s obedience over Isaac, God used the words, *“I swear by myself ... that I will surely bless you”*. This means God took an oath to confirm what he was promising, swearing by himself since there is no one greater to swear by. The second

occasion was during Abraham's trial of faith over an heir (Gen 15). God reassured Abraham about the promise of a nation, but Abraham still had doubts about the promise of the land: "*O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?*"(15:8). In answer to this query about the land God called Abraham to cut in half a heifer, a goat and a ram. When the cut carcasses were placed on the ground the presence of God, in the form of a smoking brazier and a blazing torch, passed between the separated halves. This cutting of animals was a process by which a human covenant was made and well known to Abraham God was, therefore, making a covenant with him about the land in terms Abraham could not mistake. There could be no more solemn statement of God's intent.

The Terms of the Covenant

There is an unmistakable note of permanency about the covenant promises. Concerning God's relation to the people or nation we read, "*I will establish my covenant as an **everlasting covenant** between me and you and your descendents after you for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendents after you.*"(Gen 17:7). Concerning the land we read: "*The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as **an everlasting possession** to you and your descendents after you; and I will be their God.*"(Gen 17:8). There could be no stronger word of permanence than "everlasting". He would always be their God and the land would always be their's. With regard to the land Abraham was actually made to walk the length and breadth of the land which was being promised to him, and God specified the land on the day the LORD made a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15). He said, "*To your descendents I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.*"

As the covenant stands, the obvious implication is that the Jewish race will never disappear from the earth, and the land of Canaan, as defined and delineated by God will always be "their land". Small wonder in the light of this that God should re-affirm these promises through the prophets in the form of the restoration of an exiled Jewish nation! History itself is a witness here, for the Jewish nation is still very much with us, as is the issue of "their land".

Undoubtedly over the millennia Israel has been a great nation, and in its Messiah it has certainly blessed the nations of the world and does so increasingly. But from early Christian days questions have been raised such as, **Has the covenant run its course and been fulfilled so that it might now be conveniently forgotten? Has Israel lost its covenant promises? Has they been revoked? Has the church taken them over?**

"An unmistakable note of permanency about the covenant promises"

The simple fact is that people do not make covenants to revoke them, and certainly God does not. In fact the whole point of making a covenant is to confer upon a transaction or promise a surety that it will not be broken. If a covenant is two sided, and one side's commitment is dependant upon the other keeping their side of the covenant, then the breaking of the covenant by one side could be said to release the other from its commitment and so end the covenant. But the covenant which God made with Abraham was not in the nature of a two sided covenant with equal parties. God's covenant was in the nature of promises to bless Abraham which owed nothing to Abraham and were simply given by God's sovereign grace. God had made the covenant, declared it to be eternal and would, therefore, always stand by it. Revocation by God is not, therefore, an option.

There were, on the other hand, **stipulations that God made and which Abraham had to obey**. In essence these were two: God required first that Abraham "*walk before me and be blameless*" (Gen 17:1) and second that he circumcise his whole household (17:9ff). Failure on Abraham's part in either of these requirements would rob Abraham and his people of the blessings contained in the covenant. Any Jew refusing obedience would be "cut off" and lose the blessing. Despite such strong words of warning for the disobedient there is, however, no threat of revoking the covenant.

The situation we have, therefore, is one in which the beneficiaries of the covenant, the Jews, could walk away from the blessings if they so chose, but not one in which God would "revoke" the covenant if they did. God had committed himself to an everlasting covenant, not one which depended on obedience or disobedience in any particular case, nor one which would be removed if any single generation of Jews were disobedient. Indeed even if several successive generations of Jews rejected God the covenant would still be there for a generation that would seek him. That much seems clear from the four hundred years that the nation spent in Egypt before Moses arrived, and Moses arrived because a generation of Jews in their bondage started to call out to the Lord, and God "*remembered his covenant*" (Ex. 2:24) The covenant had been made; it was stated by God himself, on oath, to be eternal and it remained for those who were obedient, however long it might take for them to emerge. It is in this light that even the Jewish rejection of Jesus must be seen as something which did not break the covenant promises.

God did not hesitate to enforce the stipulation of obedience demanded of Israel, even though he constantly showed great patience and mercy. This meant in effect that Israel through most of its history did not enjoy the full benefits of the covenants, for its history is in great measure one of disobedience. It was always only a remnant who obeyed and on that account walked in the blessing. Paul points this out very clearly in Romans 11. But the covenants were always there for the remnant who obeyed. The gross disobedience at the time of the prophets saw the nation lose the covenant blessing of the land, a loss from which, as yet, there has been no complete recovery. All the time, however, the covenant promises remained.

Thus **none of his disfavour amounted to a revocation of the "everlasting covenant"**, and it still remains over the Jewish nation and its land. A "transference" of the covenant blessings to the Christian church at the expense of the Jewish nation is an idea essentially precluded by the clear and particular stipulations of the covenant and by the very nature of the covenant concept. Because it remains an "everlasting covenant", the prophecy of future "restoration" of both the land and the people to their God remains a valid possibility. Indeed, when the covenant and the prophetic scriptures of restoration are put side by side, the idea that a future generation of the nation will enter once again into the full blessing of the original covenant through repentance and faith is in the nature of the promises, a certainty.